DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 029 FL 013 661

AUTHOR Bartelo, Dennise M.
TITLE Bridging the Gap to Literacy: Functional Writing Instruction for ESOL Students.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Basic Skills; *English (Second Language); *Functional Literacy; Language Skills; Learning Activities; *Lesson Plans; Second Language Instruction; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Adult students of English as a second language (ESL) need to learn how to express in writing what they know how to say. An introductory lesson plan is presented which has helped students put their words into writing. A unit on communicating personal information is developed from the first class meeting's introductions of name, address, occupation, etc. The objectives of the lesson are to review basic capitalization rules and to write sentences expressing name, address, and employment. The parts of the lesson include: (1) the introduction in which students are asked to name an important event of their lives; (2) content focus on rules of capitalization drawn from the information the students have supplied; (3) the first draft which includes personal information and is taken partly from sentence strips provided by the teacher; (4) a process conference during which each student reviews his or her writing and reviews capitalization rules; (5) rewriting information in a format that might be useful in their daily lives; and (6) an evaluation conference for students to share their functional writing samples. Two worksheets are attached as guides for the functional writing activity and as a reinforcement game. (AMH)

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BRIDGING THE GAP TO LITERACY: FUNCTIONAL WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR ESOL STUDENTS

by

Dennise M. Bartelo,

Reading/Learning Disabilities Specialist,

Rochester Public Schools, New Hampshire

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In teaching an adult education class in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), I found that writing was a very difficult skill needed by my students. In completing an attitude and skill inventory on the first evening of class, the students openly discussed their frustrations in completing a variety of writing tasks, such as writing notes to their children's teachers, writing a letter to a friend, and writing a resume. My class, which consisted of Cuban, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and Indian students, was able to express themselves orally and read at a basic elementary proficiency level, but they found it very difficult to express themselves in writing. The manipulation of the pencil and paper and the formation of the letters wasn't the problem. It was the understanding of how the words and sentences were to fit together into a meaningful message that would communicate their ideas and feelings.

Some of my students were preparing for the high school equivalency exam, while the majority needed language skills to help them in their daily living activities. In struggling to organize instruction to meet their variety of needs, I found myself limited by budget constraints as well as texts which stressed the mechanics of language in isolated contexts. The controlled vocabularies and structured grammatical drills offered little student involvement in actually using language to communicate a meaningful message.

These circumstances led me to rely on the basics - pencils, papers, and adults who were motivated to learn to write. In guiding my students in the writing process, I used the language experience philosophy of R. Van Allen of "What I can talk about, I can write about." I tried to give meaning to basic grammatical concepts by teaching them in a familiar context related to functional language usage. Using the introductory conversation of the first class meeting as the foundation of my prewriting activities, the following lesson helped my students begin to "put their words into writing."

Unit - Communicating Personal Information

Content - First evening of class introductions of name, address, etc.

Objectives - 1. Students will review basic rules of capitalization.

2. Students will write sentences expressing their name, address, and employment using correct capitalization.

Lesson Introduction

Students are asked to name an important thing in their life, a big event. Examples - moving to the United States, learning English, getting a job. Students are told that in writing, we show the importance of these events by using capital letters.

Content Focus

Draw from the students the rules of capitalization from the examples of important things. Since countries are important, we capitalize them; languages are important and so we capitalize them, etc. Chart these rules on the board as the students derive them from their examples.

Capitalize these things: (Sample Rule Chart)

1. People's names
2. Names of countries, cities, states
3. Names of streets
4. Abbreviations
5. Names of special organizations - companies, clubs

First Draft

Review the first evening's introductions of students by asking each student to write their name, address, and other important information. Ask the students to choose sentence strips you have prepared on their biographical information and relate what items in the sentences need to be capitalized.

Examples of sentence strips:

1. Sun Ye is from korea. (the country needs to be capitalized).
2. I saw rosa at work. (Rosa should be capitalized).
3. Setsuko lives on wilson lane. (street should be capitalized).

Process Conference

Meet with each student and ask them to review their writing and their usage of the capitalization rules. It is important to provide positive feedback at this point to encourage the student to feel comfortable with writing. Ask students why they used capital letters and help them reflect on their writing- the decisions they made to use particular words, etc.

Rewriting

Ask students to rewrite their information into a format that would be helpful to them in their daily activities. Discuss possible situations which require usage of personal information, such as job applications, resumes, change of address cards, telephone messages, and friendly letters. A sample worksheet on these activities can be used as a guide in helping the students apply these writing skills to particular settings. (See Worksheet 1)

Evaluation conference

After completion of the rewriting activity, the students can share their functional writing samples. A follow-up exercise in a game format can be used as editing practice and review of the concept of capitalization. This game can also provide reinforcement needed for the writing skills test of the high school equivalency exam. (See Worksheet 2)

1. Job Application

_____
(last) (first) (middle)

_____
(street)

_____
(city) (state) (zip code)

U.S. citizen? Yes NO
If no, state country of citizenship - _____

2. Telephone Message

Date - _____

Person Called - _____
Person Calling - _____

Message - _____
_____
_____

Time - _____

Call Rec'd by - _____

3. Friendly Letter

(Date)- _____

Dear _____,

I have just moved to _____...

4. Resume

(Name) (full address)
(telephone)

Job Objective -

Employment -

Education -

Personal Data-

References-

Worksheet 2

Post-test - "Captivating CAPITALS"

Name - _____

Directions: Read the sentences below. Circle words which need to be spelled with a capital letter. Check with the rule chart on the board as you edit the sentences. Can you find all 10 mistakes?

I am from cuba.

My name is mario.

My family and I live on smallwood dr.

I work for new england telephone company.

I work in downtown boston.

Do you speak spanish?

Answer Key - Mario (name)
Cuba (country)
Smallwood Dr. (street and abbreviation)
New England Telephone Company (company name)
Boston (city)
Spanish (language)

Summary

ESOL courses have traditionally concentrated on developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, with writing literally being last in the amount of emphasis it attained. Students need to be involved in more than the grammatical aspects of writing. They need to know the significance of their writing, and understand how to use writing to communicate specific needs. Through functional writing activities, my students were also involved in developing their vocabulary, reading comprehension, spelling, and oral language skills. I found the Maryland State Department of Education Project Basic Instructional Guide, Volume 1, 1980, a very helpful resource, as well as my community resources of newspapers, telephone directories, and store catalogs.

It is important for students to have an imput into their learning, especially adults who have to take time out from their families and work schedules for personal development. I found that the participation of ESOL adults in "learning through writing" activities helped provide practical and positive learning experiences which facilitated bridging the gap to communicative competency.